



Comptroller General
of the United States

Washington, D.C. 20548

Decision

Matter of: Suncoast Scientific, Inc.

File: B-239614

Date: September 14, 1990

Larry W. Hines for the protester.
Robert H. Whyte for Arrow Tech Associates, Inc., an interested party.
Col. Herman A. Pequese, Department of the Air Force, for the agency.
M. Penny Ahearn, Esq., David Ashen, Esq., and John M. Melody, Esq., Office of the General Counsel, GAO, participated in the preparation of the decision.

DIGEST

1. Protest alleging that agency improperly evaluated offer on the basis of specific experience not included as an evaluation criterion in the request for proposals is denied where the experience at issue was specifically set forth in the statement of work as preferable.
2. Award to higher priced, higher rated offeror is proper where solicitation provides that technical considerations are more important than price and the agency reasonably determined that the technical superiority outweighed the cost savings.

DECISION

Suncoast Scientific, Inc. protests the award of a contract to Arrow Tech Associates, Inc. under request for proposals (RFP) No. F08635-90-R-0038, issued by the Department of the Air Force for data analysis. The protester contends that the agency failed to evaluate proposals in accordance with the RFP evaluation criteria and improperly rejected the firm's lower priced, technically acceptable offer.

We deny the protest.

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BACKGROUND

The RFP contemplated the award of a firm, fixed-price contract for a base year and 4 option years for free-flight data analysis in support of the agency's Aeroballistic Research Facility. The facility is used to determine the aerodynamic and stability characteristics of developmental munitions for Air Force aircraft. Under the data analysis to be performed, photographs taken during Air Force-conducted test firings are analyzed and "data reduction" is undertaken by matching the observed motion to the theoretical equations of motion using computerized mathematical algorithms found in the Aeroballistics Research Facility Data Analysis System (ARFDAS), a set of computer programs.

The RFP provided for award to the offeror whose proposal was most advantageous to the government when technical and price/cost factors were evaluated, with price/cost considered less important in the evaluation. The solicitation listed the specific technical criteria, in descending order of importance, as experience, computer ease (ability to maintain and modify existing data reduction codes), computer facilities, and management. The first subcriterion under experience was knowledge of "free-flight aerodynamic data reduction." In this regard, the RFP's statement of work (SOW) provided that the "contractor shall have demonstrated capability and experience in free-flight data reduction, preferably in conjunction with ballistic range testing," the specific area of evaluation primarily at issue here. In addition to the data reduction task, the SOW required the successful contractor occasionally to make improvements to the ARFDAS data reduction programs.

Three offerors submitted proposals in response to the solicitation; following the evaluation of initial proposals, a competitive range of two was established, including Arrow Tech and Suncoast. After conducting discussions, the Air Force requested best and final offers (BAFO).

Under the color-coded rating and risk assessment scheme used in the evaluation, Arrow Tech's BAFO technical proposal received an overall blue/exceptional rating under the technical factors, with exceptional ratings under each technical evaluation criterion; Suncoast's BAFO technical proposal, on the other hand, received a lower overall green/acceptable rating, with acceptable ratings under each of the criteria except computer ease (where the proposal received an exceptional rating). The fundamental relative weakness found in Suncoast's proposal was the company's lack of specific experience in ballistic free-flight data

reduction, the preferred specific experience according to the SOW. Although the agency recognized that Suncoast's employees possessed experience in the more general area of aerodynamic data reduction associated with aircraft testing, it concluded that the lack of experience in the specific ballistic data reduction to be performed under the contract would necessitate significant training by agency engineers to familiarize the firm's personnel with the ARFDAS data reduction computer programs and considerable support from agency personnel in performance of the contract. Further, the agency believed that Suncoast's lack of specific experience called into question its ability to quickly and effectively update the ARFDAS programs. In addition, under the management criterion, the agency noted a lack of detail as to schedule. It determined that although Suncoast's proposed estimated hours (10,300) to complete the required tasks exceeded the agency's own estimate of the required hours (9,000), Suncoast's estimate nevertheless was low based on the lack of experience of the firm's proposed key personnel in ballistic data reduction.

In contrast, Arrow Tech's technical approach and experience level were found to be exceptional, largely on the basis that the firm's proposed personnel were determined to be recognized leaders in ballistic free-flight data reduction and, specifically, that its proposed principal engineers had been instrumental in developing the numerical methods and programming in the ARFDAS computer programs. The agency determined that in view of the expertise of the firm's proposed personnel, Arrow Tech would be able to quickly and efficiently assess, analyze, and reduce the data with a minimum of agency support. Although Arrow Tech's estimate of labor hours (6,105) was lower than the agency estimate (9,000 hours), Arrow Tech's estimate nevertheless was determined realistic based on the exceptional past experience of its personnel in performing ballistic free-flight data analysis for the Air Force. Further, the agency concluded that Arrow Tech's detailed program and work schedule was indicative of its knowledge of and experience in the required data reduction.

Suncoast's BAFO price of \$354,888 totaled \$98,174 less than Arrow Tech's price of \$453,062. The source selection authority, however, determined that in view of Arrow Tech's technical superiority, particularly the firm's experience with and in-depth understanding of ballistic data reduction, and the greater risk associated with Suncoast resulting from the firm's lack of the preferred ballistic experience and the likely resulting need for greater support from the agency, Suncoast's lower cost was outweighed by the technical superiority of Arrow Tech's proposal. Upon

learning of the subsequent award to Arrow Tech, Suncoast filed this protest with our Office.^{1/}

EXPERIENCE

Suncoast primarily contends that the agency improperly evaluated offerors' experience on the basis of their aeroballistic experience, referenced in the SOW, rather than on the basis of their general aerodynamic free-flight data reduction experience, the stated evaluation subcriterion. Furthermore, Suncoast maintains that its own free-flight aerodynamic data reduction experience, which the agency evaluated as a strength, was fundamentally similar to the preferred ballistic data reduction experience in that the equations for motion for an aerodynamic shape in flight are essentially the same, both for an aircraft in the open atmosphere, i.e., aerodynamic, and for a projectile in an enclosed test range, i.e., aeroballistic.

In reviewing protests of allegedly improper evaluation, our Office will not substitute its judgment for that of the agency's evaluators, but instead will examine the record to determine whether the agency's judgment was reasonable and in accordance with the listed criteria and whether there were any violations of procurement statutes or regulations. McCollum and Assoc., B-232221, Nov. 10, 1988, 88-2 CPD ¶ 470.

We find the agency's evaluation of experience reasonable. In our view, the protester construes the evaluation section too narrowly, as if it were to stand alone without the rest of the RFP to complement it. The RFP was designed to be read and interpreted as a whole and, therefore, the SOW and the technical evaluation section should have been read together as a description of the Air Force's requirements and how the responses to the RFP would be evaluated. Recon Optical, Inc., B-232125, Dec. 1, 1988, 88-2 CPD ¶ 544.

The RFP, when read as a whole, clearly put offerors on notice that ballistic experience would be considered in the evaluation. While the statement of evaluation criteria specified a knowledge of the overall, more general area of aerodynamic data reduction, the SOW made it clear that experience in the more specific ballistic data reduction work, although not required, was preferable and thus would

^{1/} Although we have considered all of the protester's arguments, we do not consider it necessary to review each argument here. We believe the following discussion is adequate for purposes of resolving the protest.

receive a higher rating. In addition, the SOW referenced various technical reports which described the ballistic nature of the agency's work and its data analysis system. It should have been clear to the protester after discussions that the agency would consider and prefer the more specific ballistic experience in the evaluation. See SelectTech Servs. Corp., B-229851, Apr. 18, 1988, 88-1 CPD ¶ 375. During discussions, the contracting officer asked Suncoast to clarify and elaborate on any specific aeroballistic data reduction experience possessed by the company or its staff, the number of hours of training expected from the agency's aeroballistic engineers for data reduction code familiarization, and the percentage of proposed engineering hours to be used to train staff in aeroballistic data reduction versus the percentage to be spent in actually accomplishing the data reduction task itself.

We find no indication from the protester's proposal that the firm had specific ballistic data reduction experience. While the protester contends that its aerodynamic data reduction experience should have been considered equivalent to ballistic experience, the agency reports that there are significant differences between aerodynamic free-flight analysis and ballistic free-flight analysis; according to the agency, each involve different sets of equations and parameters. We will not substitute our technical judgment for the contracting agency's technical judgment unless its conclusions are shown to be arbitrary or otherwise unreasonable. Teledyne Brown Eng'g, Inc., B-237368, Feb. 16, 1990, 90-1 CPD ¶ 285. The protester's mere disagreement with the agency's technical judgment concerning the technical distinctions between the areas of experience, in the absence of any additional evidence, such as expert technical opinion, is not a basis for sustaining the protest. See Pathology Assocs. Inc., B-237208.2, 69 Comp. Gen. 269 (1990), 90-1 CPD ¶ 292.

We consider it unobjectionable that the agency preferred experience in the specific work to be performed under the contract to the protester's more general experience. In any case, it was clear from the RFP's use of two distinct terms for the areas of expertise at issue that the agency did not consider the experience equivalent. If Suncoast objected to the agency's stated intention of considering the more specific experience to be more valuable, it was required to protest in this regard prior to the closing date for receipt of initial proposals, so as to permit resolution of the matter in a timely fashion. 4 C.F.R. § 21(a)(1) (1990). Consequently, as Suncoast did not demonstrate in its proposal any experience in the preferable area of ballistic data reduction, we have no basis to question the agency's

evaluation of the firm's experience level as only acceptable, that is, as less desirable than Arrow Tech's.

MANAGEMENT

With respect to the management evaluation, Suncoast complains that while its estimate of 10,300 hours of work was considered low, Arrow Tech's even lower estimate, 6,105 hours, was not questioned. In this regard, the protester claims that historical data for contractor hours demonstrates that significantly more than 6,105 hours per year would be required to handle the expected workload and thus the awardee's proposed hours would be insufficient.

Contrary to the protester's assertion, however, the Air Force specifically concluded that the 6,105 hours proposed by Arrow Tech were realistic. In this regard, the agency considered both the specific breakdown of hours proposed by Arrow Tech and the firm's exceptional experience and proposed approach to accomplishing the work. For example, the agency noted that not only had Arrow Tech's engineers been instrumental in development of the ARFDAS computer programs and had previously performed aeroballistic data reduction for the Air Force, but also that the majority of the data analysis was in fact to be performed by their most experienced engineers. The agency points out that, by contrast, Suncoast's senior engineers were scheduled to perform only 100 to 200 hours per year while an engineer with very little experience was to perform 1,800 to 1,880 hours per year, that is, most of the work. In addition, the agency considered that Arrow Tech's proposed facilities were exceptional compared to Suncoast's, since Arrow Tech possesses their own computer on which to run ARFDAS programs and thus would not be restricted to use of the agency's computer through the agency's relatively slow modem, as would Suncoast.

As for Suncoast's reliance upon historical data, we note that the data is for a workload not entirely comparable to that to be required under the contemplated contract. In any case, even accepting its estimate, Suncoast has not shown it was unreasonable for the agency to expect that experienced personnel under new management would process and analyze data somewhat more efficiently. Nor has Suncoast shown that it was unreasonable for the agency to expect that Suncoast's inexperienced personnel would require substantially more effort to accomplish the same work. Under these circumstances, the protester's disagreement with the agency's technical judgment as to the number of hours necessary for a highly experienced company, such as Arrow Tech, to perform the contract provides no basis for us

to question the reasonableness of the agency's evaluation in this area.


COST/TECHNICAL TRADEOFF

Suncoast argues that even given the perceived technical superiority of Arrow Tech's proposal, this did not justify paying a 27.6 percent (i.e., \$98,174) premium, relative to Suncoast's price.

Cost/technical tradeoffs may be made in selecting an awardee subject only to the test of rationality and consistency with the established evaluation factors. Maytag Aircraft Corp., B-237068.3, Apr. 26, 1990, 90-1 CPD ¶ 430. We have consistently upheld awards to technically superior, higher priced offerors where the contracting agency has determined that the technical difference is sufficiently significant to outweigh the cost difference. Id.; Systems & Processes Eng'g Corp., B-234142, May 10, 1989, 89-1 CPD ¶ 441.

Here, we find that the record supports the Air Force's determination that the technical merit of Arrow Tech's proposal outweighed its higher cost. The RFP provided that technical factors were more important than price, Arrow Tech's technical proposal was rated exceptional in all but one area, and Suncoast's proposal was rated as only acceptable in all but one area. Further, the Air Force reports that work under the contract will generate results that will influence multi-million dollar procurements. Under these circumstances, and in view of the technically complex nature of the required analysis, we do not believe that the agency was precluded from selecting the higher cost but technically superior proposal, offering the most experienced personnel, so as to assure receipt of a superior work product. See DCI Eng'g Corp., B-218335, June 28, 1985, 85-1 CPD ¶ 742.

The protest is denied.


for James F. Hinchman
General Counsel